SOSOSTRIS

A TALE OF THE KING IN YELLOW

by John Tynes

For Rob & Lisa,
and their little cabin in the woods.

Text ©2000 John Tynes
Cover Photomontage ©2000 John Tynes
All rights reserved worldwide.
Any resemblance between characters in this work
and actual persons, living or dead,
is purely coincidental.

Published January, 2000
by Armitage House
5536 25th Ave. NE
Seattle, WA 98105-2415
www.tccorp.com • rev@tccorp.com

First Printing
ISBN 1-887797-18-7

SOSOSTRIS

A TALE OF THE KING IN YELLOW

by John Tynes

Seattle, Washington

4

The lady of situations strode through the doors of the hotel Broadalbin, her nephew at her side. Her name was Anna Sosostris—though those who knew of her and her gift referred to her, with reverence, as Madame Sosostris only. None dared use her first name, as they did not presume to affect such familiarity.

"Alex, come along," she cooed in her whispery old voice. She pulled the child along by one hand, leading him past the stone gargoyles with the flames flickering brightly in their mouths and down the steps and into the lobby.

It was late. A handful of hotel guests sat in overstuffed leather armchairs arranged in semi-circles around two massive fireplaces set into opposite walls, the area bisected by the slim red carpet that led from the front door to the front desk. The rest of the carpet was a rich umber, the walls a patterned red velvet. No paintings hung on the walls; a variety of mirrors in gilded frames hung in their stead.

The guests took only brief notice of Sosostris and her charge and soon turned back to the flames. Some were toasting bread, affixed to clasps at the end of long handles. Their companions waited attentively with marmalade and strawberry jam, or small hunks of fresh butter on saucers. Porcelain teapots sat warmly beneath snug cozies, adjacent brimming cups wisping steam into the air, little pots of cream and sugar standing in attendance nearby.

The woman and the boy walked the length of the carpet. Sosostris carried a sizable patchwork bag, containing her clothes, toiletries, and of course her wicked pack of cards.

Alex carried a much smaller canvas bag, containing much the same, though he had no deck of his own.

The front desk was an enclosed structure that abutted the back wall. It had its own ceiling and was fronted with ornate scrollwork depicting cherubs and gargoyles, looking rather like a small chapel contained within the two-story-tall lobby. Along the wall to the left of the front desk were a number of doors and windows that looked into a parlor, a dining room, and a ballroom; to the right were doors to offices and storerooms and a great free-standing wrought-iron elevator shaft that reached into the ceiling and beyond.

From behind the desk, the clerk greeted them. "Madame Sosostris, how nice to see you again. Is this your son?"

Sosostris sat her bag heavily onto the floor and harumphed. "Hardly. This is Alex, my nephew. Alex, this is Doyle—he works here, and he will get us my usual room." She leaned forward. "That is correct, isn't it, Doyle?" Her thick Greek accent rendered "Doyle" with the tone of an obscenity, spite the engine that drove it.

Doyle smiled thinly. "Of course, madam. Your room is ready. Number 219." He passed her the key.

Sosostris leaned back, taking the key with one withered hand, and turned to look down at the boy. "Excellent. Come, Alex. We will not wait for the bellhop." At this last word she shot a look at Doyle, a look emblazoned with accusation as well as a message: *I know all.*

Doyle continued to smile and he nodded. "As you wish, madam. As you wish."

Sosostris lifted her bag again and then she and the child made their way to the elevator and stepped inside. In moments they were gone, ascending upward into the building.

Doyle stepped back away from the desk, and turned his head to address someone standing in the shadows, just beyond the open area into which anyone in the lobby could see. He whispered something, softly, and the person to whom he spoke nodded twice. Then, with a herky-jerky movement, the figure spun around and drifted down the hall behind them.

In his room at the Broadalbin—which he had not left for almost forty years—Mr. Wilde sat in a worn armchair covered in blue velvet. From his limp body there extended numerous threads, perhaps a dozen in number, up to the ceiling. But there was no ceiling; the whitewashed walls ended as they should, yet across the horizontal plane where the ceiling should have been there was only a layer of mist, a swirling miasma of cloud, impenetrable to the eye. The threads extended up through this, into some unseen recess beyond.

Mr. Wilde's painted wooden head lay slack to one side. The carved wooden jaw hung loose in its grooves between his cheeks, leaving a hole which was his mouth. His body, such as it was, was dressed in a red velvet smoking jacket with a crisp white shirt extending beyond the collar of the jacket. His carved wooden hands extended from the sleeves, resting

motionless on the arms of the chair. His feet—which were not feet at all, but rather a pair of slippers sewn to the cuffs of his woolen trousers—sat askew upon the floor at the base of the chair.

The life-size marionette that was Mr. Wilde suddenly jerked, as if coming awake. His head rose until it assumed a pose of consciousness. His jaw clacked shut, and he looked to and fro about the room. There was a bed in which he never slept, a writing-desk at which he never sat, and a gas lamp that burned all the time. Cupboards along one wall sat closed and silent.

"She's here," came his voice, issued from everywhere at once but obviously not from his wooden throat. His jaw clacked open and shut several times, mimicking the movement of a human mouth speaking the same words.

"Sosostris is here," Mr. Wilde said. "At last."

The threads grew taut, and lifted him out of his chair until he was standing, somewhat limp. He began to pace slowly about the room, his every movement orchestrated by the unseen operator above, guided by the pull of the threads.

"There will be time, there will be time," he said. *"To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet; there will be time to murder and create."*

Mr. Wilde paused, and his wooden head looked about the room once more until his eyes settled on a cupboard on the far wall.

"'Create' I have done," he said, "and prepared a face besides."

He looked up, into the mist, towards the hands of that which gave him the ramshackle appearance of life.

"Now it is time for murder," he said, "and to prepare for the crowning of the king."

Several blocks away from the Broadalbin, a man stalked down an alley. He was dressed in clothes that could charitably be called rags, encompassed by a soiled and torn overcoat. Perhaps once it was beige; its color now was splotchy and indeterminate. He walked with his hands in his pants pockets, trying to keep warm against the chill October air. Emerging onto the street, he looked back and forth down the length of the road. People bustled about, past the closed shops, towards their varied homes. It was the end of another work-day, for those lucky enough to be working in the midst of the economic crisis. Presumably those who were not employed had better things to do than to loiter about where they were not wanted.

The man was wanted. It was this fact that propelled him onwards, down the street.

He had haunted the alleyways of a hundred cities across the world: Paris, Budapest, Moscow, Dresden, Sydney, and on and on. He rarely ate—only when circumstances made it appropriate—and never slept. In lieu of sleeping, he would spend days crouched in some abandoned building, lost in thought, imagining past glories in the framework of whoever he had been before his present condition had occurred. He didn't *think* that he had any reliable

memories of that time, but he had imagined so many scenarios of lives lived that he was no longer sure; thousands of days spent in idle speculation and fabrication had slowly eroded what little sense of certainty he had about his past, to the point that he could not tell the difference between legitimate memory and invented fantasy. Even the period that coincided with his present condition was fuzzy; had he really been taken in by a kindly widow in San Antonio with whom he had spent three years of bliss, or was that something he had dreamed up in the course of a long-ago reverie? He did not know.

It did not matter. His life was spent in the dreadful aftermath of a great story-telling, and he had spent the intervening decades groping at the pale shadows of stories about himself. Sometimes he believed that if he told enough stories, he would tell the true one: the one of who he was, where he was born, what he had done, who he had loved. Like a thousand monkeys at a thousand typewriters, perhaps he would eventually stumble on the true story of his lost life.

But would he know it when he found it?

At present, yet another idiotic little drama was unfolding. He had felt the call, the irresistible summons of one who knew him for what he was—and so he came. He came to New York, a city he had visited once for certain and perhaps a hundred times more, and stalked steadily towards the summoner. It was an event he was used to. Periodically some powerful sorcerer or minor aesthete got ahold of the mindset that always drew him like a beacon, that peculiar combination of melancholy and decadence that tugged at him from across this darkened globe of earth. They were all the same, these dabblers in surreality; they knew of him by reputation, knew of the great work he had vomited forth upon the world so many decades gone, knew that he was ever since a lost soul, a wild card set loose in the great ever-shuffling deck of the world's cities. They were after money, or power, or sex, or redemption; glimpsing in him all of these things, they called him forth and involved him in whatever paltry machinations they were plotting. They always came to naught.

The man thought to himself: *I am forever a character in the stories of others.*

And also: *I am an attendant lord, one that will do, to swell a progress, start a scene or two.*

Madame Sosostris and her nephew, Alex, stepped out from the elevator and into the mahogany hallway of the second floor. The carpet was a rich blue in color, with a thick texture. Sosostris looked up at the ceiling, and noted the slotted tracks that ran the length of the hall. She looked down at Alex and pointed at the slots.

"See that? The bellboys, the wait staff—they aren't human. They're puppets, life-size marionettes. Their strings run up into those tracks."

The child looked up and down the length of the hallway's ceiling, taking it in.

"It's not important, really," Sosostris said. "That's just the way things are here. But keep it in mind. If you see a bellhop who doesn't have strings running to the ceiling, he isn't a real bellhop. Beware of such folk."

"Who speaks for them?" Alex asked quietly. "Who is their voice?"

Sosostris laughed, a sharp bark that sounded like a dog.

"Who indeed? That's a question you aren't allowed to ask here. If you do—well—let's just say that they have to get their bellhops from somewhere, child. Better to keep quiet."

The pair moved down the hall to room 219. Sosostris inserted the key into the lock, turned it, and opened the door. The room was of average size, with two beds, assorted furniture, and a private bathroom. The walls were white, ornamented only with three mirrors. Windows faced the street in front of the hotel.

"Here we are. Unpack your clothes into the bureau. Fold them properly, if you know what's good for you. We'll be here three days at least, I expect, so you ought to get comfortable."

"Can I wear my dress?" Alex asked.

"No. No, no, no. Under no circumstances are you to wear your dress. You are a boy, as far as anyone here is concerned. You must not ever say that you are a girl. Do you understand?"

"Yes, auntie."

Sosostris thought to herself: *I'm not really your aunt. But I'm not telling you that, you little beast.*

8

The hotel Broadalbin catered to two different types of clients. One type came and went in a short span of time. The other type came and stayed, indefinitely. This latter type was in the majority by a substantial margin.

No one came to the Broadalbin unless there was a good reason for it. The hotel was not listed in any guide book, it did not advertise, and if you didn't know it existed you weren't likely to even notice it.

Among those who were in the hotel for an indefinite stay, there was a strange sense of camaraderie. It was more than just the natural sense of companionship that emerges among those who share a living space of sorts; these people were united in a sense of purpose. They all had their reasons for entering the Broadalbin, but they only had one reason to leave. That reason came to each of them, eventually, but was preceded by a stay of weeks, months, or even years. In the meantime, none of these residents ever left the hotel, for any reason. They slept in the hotel, they dined in the hotel, they spent each day in their room, or in the lobby, or in the ballroom, or in the parlor, or wandering with ropes and lanterns through the whisper labyrinth reached through the basement and by means of a particular force of will. Those who had not been here for long received newspapers from the front desk and placed orders under assumed names with nearby bookstores and other shops. These orders were retrieved by the hotel's staff. It was understood that the residents were not to mention the hotel when placing their orders. No one ever told them this outright, but they took it for granted that this was the case. Those who had been here for a longer period lost interest

in the outside world and did not trouble the staff with such mundane, irrelevant errands. Their lives were contained and constrained within the hotel, a condensed cosmos of existence.

The front desk of the Broadalbin did not sell postcards. Or envelopes. Or stationary. Or stamps.

The hotel rooms had none of these things, either. The rooms also lacked the customary bible; instead, each room had one or more books left behind by departing long-term residents and re-distributed to empty rooms throughout the hotel. For when a long-term guest left the Broadalbin, they did not take anything with them save what they wore. And they did not return . . . at least, not until the day after Madame Sosostris arrived.

On the morning of the day after her arrival, the guests of the hotel were united in a purpose. It was not a grand one, but it had a certain shabby grandeur. That evening was the Broadalbin's monthly masquerade ball, and decorations were underway. Special events such as this one were held several times a month, and while encouraged and supported by the hotel, they were almost entirely organized and carried out by the long-term guests who, after all, had little better to do with their time. Sylvia Lord and her husband Charles hung *crêpe* paper streamers in the ballroom.

"It's going to be a wonderful ball, don't you think?" Sylvia asked her husband.

"Of course, dear, of course," Charles said soothingly.

"My costume is all ready," she said slyly. "But it will be up to you to work out who I am!"

"I shall give it my all, my dear."

"You'd best not make a mistake, Charles—I'd hate to catch you planting a kiss on Ms. Landon because you're pretending to think she's me in costume."

"Perish the thought, my dear."

Sylvia finished with the current patch of *crêpe* and climbed down the ladder. She looked admiringly at the decorations strewn across the ballroom.

"It's going to be a wonderful ball, don't you think?"

"Of course, dear, of course."

As the Lords were hanging *crêpe* in the ballroom, the man in the overcoat entered the front door of the Broadalbin. He had been here some decades before, for a protracted stay; that was one of the few elements of his old life that he was relatively sure of. While he was here, he had embarked on a writing project. When it was finished, he had descended into the whisper labyrinth that was beneath the hotel and yet not beneath the hotel. He had found the ornate bottle with his name inscribed on the small brass plate affixed to the bottle's rotund base, opened it, and put an end to the man he had been.

Today he returned, the first long-term guest to walk through the front door twice. Standing on the dias, framed by the twin gargoyles who issued flame from their mouths, he

surveyed the lobby.

He thought: *I have been here before. Back when I knew who I was. Of all the places I have been and all the times I have spent, no two have been alike—until now.*

The thought lent a certain spring to his step. Perhaps this time, he hadn't just been called at random by some pathetic fool with delusions of grandeur; perhaps this time, it really mattered.

The man strode forward, with a determination he had not felt in living memory or even in invented fantasy. Ahead lay the elevator, and what lay beyond. In the back of his mind, a thousand monkeys stopped their interminable typing and looked up as one, two thousand simian eyes staring blankly into the labyrinthine corridors of his being.

Madame Sosostris pulled the large sponge from the bath water. She raised it up to the level of the child's face and let the excess water pour from the soft thing she held in her old hands. She brought the sponge to the child's neck and daubed her with it.

"Clean," she said. "We must get you clean. You're covered in filth."

She moved the sponge over the child's shoulders, her neck, her face.

"Hand me the soap," she said. The child did so.

Sosostris took the soap and rubbed it onto the child's skin in a smooth, circular motion. As the lather left trails upon the girl, Sosostris worked the bar more vigorously, wrapping the child's upper body in a blanket of foam.

"Why is it, Auntie," the girl said. "Why must I pretend to be a boy?"

Sosostris sighed. "You are a magic child, my dear. And you are a woman—though a young one still. Those who would use your magic are almost always men. If they knew your sex, they would have more ways of using your magic. Women like us are weaker in that way. Men can use the knowledge of our sex to control us, to take our magic from us. It is the way in which they work. If they think you are a boy, they will not have ready access to your magic . . . and the ways in which they will try to use you will not work. You are in disguise."

"But why? Why do they want to?"

"The why of it is old as anything, Alexia. Men spend their lives finding ways in which to exploit women, especially women like us. They consider us weak, easily used. Those who know what you are and what power you hold would stop at nothing to take you and use you towards their own ends."

Sosostris put the soap into the recessed slot in the wall above the tub, and began rubbing the girl's skin with the sponge.

"It is all make-believe, Alexia. We are fooling them, like the girl fooled Rumpelstiltskin. Knowledge is our most potent power. We use it to keep the men at bay, so they cannot take that which is ours by right."

Hello?"

The door to Mr. Wilde's room at the Broadalbin was only slightly open. The voice issued through the crack, a whisper.

"Yes, I'm here. Come in."

The door swung wide, and the man in the overcoat entered. He closed the door behind him, and regarded the marionette in the armchair impassively.

"I'm here," the stranger said.

"So I noticed," said Mr. Wilde, his jaw clacking open and shut.

"I don't know why I'm here," the stranger said. "I just came where I was called."

"You've got a lot in common with the Phantom, then," Mr. Wilde said. "He'll be here soon, though he won't get as far as my door on his own. You'll have to bring him up here."

"Who are you?" the stranger asked, intrigued for the first time in the second phase of his life.

"I am Mr. Wilde. You will call me that. In years past, I was known as a repairer of reputations. I had a network of people who would spread whatever rumor I desired, through every level of society. I could repair a man's reputation—or destroy it. I preferred to accentuate the positive in the description of my trade, of course. But I'm retired."

"So what do you do now?"

"I wait. I wait in this pitiful excuse of an existence. I wait in this hotel room. I wait for you, and for a handful of others. I have waited a long, long time in this room. But my wait is almost over."

"Who else are you waiting for?"

"Madame Sosostris, for one. She is a fortune-teller, and a channeler of power. Her nephew, Alex, is another. They have both arrived. You are still a third, and here you stand. Finally, there is the Phantom."

"The Phantom?"

"The Phantom of Truth. I should think that you were familiar with him. You once wrote a play that featured him."

"The play," the stranger sighed. "I'm here because of the play. What else? That's all anyone is ever interested in."

"Of course. There's nothing else about you that is the slightest bit interesting. But you wrote *The King in Yellow.* That's interesting."

"I suppose you have some mad scheme in which you would like to enlist my aid."

"Of course. But for once, this mad scheme has a goal with which you may be in sympathy. I know you have lost all memory of who you are. I know you cannot die."

"Then you know more than most. My existence is a curse."

"It is not permanent. Help me, and I will bring you into personal contact with the being responsible for your condition. Beyond that I cannot help—whether or not he will release you from your wretched servitude, I cannot say. But I can at least offer you an

audience: a chance."

"That's more than I've had in years, puppet-man. I'll help you. Tell me what I can do."

"You must wait. In the lobby. He will arrive, soon."

"Who?"

"The Phantom of Truth, of course. Haven't you heard? New York's up for grabs; if found wanting, it will become one with Carcosa, just as Yhtill did in times long gone. The Phantom is here to make that determination. While it's here, though, it can—perhaps—be coerced into other tasks of considerable interest to you and I."

"What's your interest in this?"

"Power, what else? And knowledge. The two are often one in the same."

Several miles from the Broadalbin and several hours after Mr. Wilde's visitor arrived, a man lay asleep in his small apartment. A table nearby his bed held a typewriter, with a blank sheet of paper at the ready. The room was silent except for the man's breathing. He rolled over and muttered something unintelligible, a fragment from some dream.

On the table, the typewriter clattered and words appeared on the paper.

The man stirred. The typewriter continued clattering away. The noise of it slowly invaded the man's consciousness, and after a minute or so he sat up groggily and looked at the source of the noise.

The typewriter stopped.

The man threw back the covers and stumbled out of bed. He was drunk. He moved unsteadily over to the table, and pulled out the sheet of paper. He read what was written there.

When he finished, the man tore the paper into strips. Then he ate the strips of paper, one by one, his face bearing a submissive cast. At last, when the message was devoured, he lowered his head and closed his eyes.

Slowly, at a pace no faster than the motes of dust that swirled in the air, captured in the dim light from the windows, the man faded, faded, faded from view, until he was gone.

Over the course of the next hour, the typewriter occasionally clacked a few more keys. The motions of these keys put ink directly on the roller, where no one could read it. Eventually it stopped, and did not move again. The message it had spelled out would never be received; whether or not it was meant to be received would never be known, except by the being who had sent it.

That evening, the ballroom of the Broadalbin hotel was alive with light. The gilded archways and illuminated Chinese panels lent the room a hearty glow, resonant with life. Dancers in costume moved amongst the *crêpe* streamers, arms around shoulders and hearts buried in secrets. They were fairies, angels, harlequins, nobles, old men, milk-maids. Others sat to the side, also costumed, quaffing glasses of sherry or scotch, at one of

the tables that ringed the dance floor. At the head of the ballroom was a stage, slightly elevated, at which a small orchestra of marionettes in formal wear and feathered bird masks played sweet, sweet music.

"Madame Sosostris, such a pleasure," Sylvia Lord said, as she and her foppish husband Charles sat down at the fortune-teller's table. Sylvia extended her arm, covered in a long white glove, and gently and briefly took Sosostris's hand. "We've had just the most delightful evening," she said, her head pivoting smoothly to catch Charles' eye for a moment.

"Delightful," Charles said.

Sylvia was dressed as a faerie, with gossamer wings and a lace domino mask over her eyes. Charles was dressed as a chimney sweep, with a top hat on his head and charcoal rubbed on his face. Madame Sosostris was dressed as herself, that being all the costume she needed.

"We'd heard of your arrival, and of your delightful nephew Alex. Hello, Alex," Sylvia said, taking Alexia's small hand.

"Yes. Alex and I are here for a brief stay. I trust the two of you have been here for an extended visit?"

Sylvia fluttered her eyelids coyly. "Why yes, Madame Sosostris. You do see all. Charles and I are awaiting a rendezvous, don't you know, with what lies *beyond*." She emphasized this last word theatrically, even melodramatically, as if she was a bad actor in a poor play.

Sosostris nodded generously, willing to put up with any idiocy while she drank her sherry. Alexia played with the small crystal bowl of peanuts that sat near the edge of the white-clothed table.

Sylvia glanced briefly at her husband, and then leaned close. "Madame Sosostris, I wonder if you might do a reading for us. I know this is terribly abrupt, but my husband would so appreciate having his fortune read by one so skilled as yourself."

Sosostris disguised her sigh as one of pleasure, rather than weariness. "Of course. I'd be delighted."

Charles chuckled drunkenly. "I don't suppose you could give me the results of tomorrow's race at the downs, eh?"

Sosostris smiled widely and with obvious falseness. "It doesn't work that way, I'm afraid."

Sylvia kicked her husband under the table, in a fashion obvious to everyone present. "Of *course* it doesn't. Don't be such a fool, Charles."

Sosostris dug into her great bag, almost a satchel, which sat at the floor by her feet. After several moments of intent burrowing, her hands removed themselves from within and produced a box covered in aged leather. She lifted off the lid and took from it an oversized tarot deck of obvious antiquity.

"I will confine this reading to the major arcana," she said in a voice that suggested this was a rote speech for non-paying customers, "for the sake of brevity. I won't ask you to pose

a question. It will be a general reading as to this present point in your life. I am available for more involved readings, but only by . . . appointment. I hope you understand."

"Of course," Charles said. "Of course."

Sosostris looked through the deck and removed the topmost set of cards, then placed the rest aside. She sorted through this subset for a moment, glancing at the cards of the major arcana. She appraised Charles critically. "The hermit, I think, if that does not displease you."

"The hermit?" Charles said.

"Your signifier. The card that represents you. The hermit signifies prudence—among other things."

"Prudence," Charles said, nodding satisfactorily. "That means wisdom, as I recall, doesn't it?"

"As you recall," agreed Sosostris vaguely, laying a card face-up on the table. It depicted a middle-aged, portly man with a jovial expression, wearing a robe. He stood on a raft with water seeping through its cracks, and held a lantern aloft. A fish had leapt from the water onto the raft, and its human-like face seemed to be screaming.

"Doesn't look very wise, does he dear?" Charles said, amused, as Sosostris shuffled the rest of the cards.

"No, he doesn't," Sylvia said, vocal poison dripping from her tongue.

Sosostris ignored them, took a moment to slap Alexia's hand as the child threatened to pull the dish of peanuts off the table, and then drew a second card. This one she lay atop the hermit.

"The empress," Sosostris said. "In this position she is what is guiding you, and she is the sea in which you swim. She signifies progress, energy, a driving force." The card showed a young woman with platinum-blonde hair wearing a gold circlet and carrying a scepter bejeweled with emeralds. She reclined on a low couch, surrounded by threadbare, rotting tapestries. "It is a difficult time for you, but your momentum is profound."

She took a third card, and laid it horizontally across the stack of the hermit and empress. "The last judgement. This is what stands before you, the obstacle you must cross. You are in proximity of epiphany, good sir, a rare position to be in." The card showed a great banquet-hall with an overturned table at the center. A large number of guests recoiled from the middle of the hall, seeming not to mind the food and drink that had inadvertently been splashed upon their finery. Their faces had frozen in disbelief and terror, each one staring at an open window at the room's end. What lay beyond the window was indeterminate.

Charles glanced at his wife. "Good things ahead, eh?"

Sosostris ignored this aside to the gallery and took a fourth card. This one she lay above the existing stack. "The hierophant, reversed. This is what you are striving towards. It is correctness, propriety, circumstance proscribed by circumspect."

Charles looked at the card. It showed a sneering elderly man wearing ecclesiastical garb, standing before two naked monks. Each of the pair carried a whip in his hand, and every part of their bodies was covered with red welts.

"Can't say that's the sort of correctness I had in mind," Charles said with a chuckle. Sylvia made a face.

Sosostris reached towards her wicked pack and drew the next, laying it just below the central stack. "The wheel of fortune, reversed." It showed a dark spiral of stars and nebulæ, centering on a single point of darkness. The formation of the stars suggested masks of various shapes and sizes. "This represents your resources; collectively, your tool."

Sylvia giggled at this.

"It signifies abundance. It suggests that your wealth and your inclination towards indulgence will fuel you in pursuit of your goal."

"I'll drink to that," Charles said, taking a gulp of his scotch.

Alexia nibbled on a peanut.

Sosostris drew the next card, laying it to the right of the central stack. "The sun," she said. It showed a slim book bound in black leather with heavy, rusted metal hasps. A twisted yellow sigil was worked into the cover. "This is what you are coming away from, your immediate past. It signifies a relationship, a marriage, a bond."

"How delightful, Charles," Sylvia said brightly. "It's us. Isn't that sweet?"

"No," Sosostris said. "That card is not about you, madam." She drew the next, placing it to the left of the main stack. "This is what you are moving towards. This is the situation that is unfolding before you." On the card, a pair of jackals howled up at the same yellow sigil seen on the book of the last card. Each jackal sat on opposite sides of a stream. "You are entering a period of deception and treachery. There are those who hunt you."

"Say," said Charles, "what's that symbol? It's on both of the cards."

Sosostris looked at the two cards, and at the tri-hooked symbol that lay on each. "It is of no concern. The meaning is obscure, and is frankly the property of a bygone age. Do not concern yourself with it." She drew another card, and placed it below and to the right of the existing configuration. "Temperance. This is your attitude towards your current situation. Much as the hermit suggested, this means you are cautious, careful, and circumspect in your approach to the near future." On the card could be seen a shining golden crown inlaid with silver leaves and encrusted with diamonds. Beneath it sat an illuminated piece of parchment; none of its lettering was readable except for an ornately-penned gothic "W" below the document's title.

She drew another card, and lay it just above the previous one. "This card represents your environment, the set of circumstances that envelop you at the moment. It's the tower. Its presence here is not good—it suggests that you dwell in a house of deception and betrayal." The card depicted a city of enormous towers and crooked alleyways, most of which were lost in shadow. One mighty structure stabbed towards the heavens far above its

lesser brethren; the rising or setting moon, swollen to an unnatural size, floated before the bulk of the spire. Many tiny, richly-dressed figures were falling from its top. Sosostris eyed Charles warily for a moment. He returned her gaze with a flustered look.

Sosostris drew still another card and placed it above the tower.

"Justice," Sosostris read.

Charles smiled. "That sounds all right."

Sosostris cocked her head briefly, as if to say: *What's the difference?*

"This indicates what you are hoping for, plain and simple." On the card, a young-looking man dressed in a riding cloak held up one arm in greeting. The other arm was folded across his chest. His face was grim, matching the bleak, lifeless landscape behind him. "You seek a reckoning."

"I reckon I'll have another drink," Charles laughed falsely, taking a swig.

Sosostris, relentless and bland all at once, turned up the final card and lay it at the top of the last row of three which were to the side of the central configuration. She took a sharp breath.

The card depicted a figure in tattered yellow robes, with a strange mask upon his face. He sat upon a throne of onyx, one hand clutching fiercely at the throne while the other rested upon his chin—or held the mask in place, one of the two.

"The emperor," Sosostris said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Charles looked at it expectantly, with a sudden canny look in his eyes. "Yes? What does it mean?"

"He is coming," Sosostris said, her eyes not leaving the card.

Charles feigned confusion. "Yes? Well—what does that mean?"

Sosostris looked deep into the card for a span of seconds that stretched into eternity. At last she broke her gaze and stared Charles full in the face.

"Tarot decks traditionally have seventy-eight cards in them, sir. Mine has seventy-seven."

Charles returned her stare. "Yes?"

"My pack does not contain the emperor. It never has."

"But he's right there!"

"Yes," Sosostris said. "So he is."

The table was silent. Charles looked at his wife with an expression of pure sheep-dumbness. She returned his look in equal measure. Their eyes twinkled with subversion, giving lie to their expressions.

Sosostris took the unused portion of the deck and fanned the cards out onto the table. They should have been the fifty-six cards of the minor arcana—yet every single one was identical to the card she had just laid out.

The emperor. Again and again. The fan-fold repetition suggested that he stood in a hall of mirrors where the angles were all wrong.

Sosostris rose and looked at her charge. "Alex, we will return to our room now. Go. I will follow." Alexia obediently got up and left the masquerade. The fortune-teller gathered up her cards while Charles and Sylvia looked on in uncomfortable but practiced silence. When Sosostris was done, she looked at the couple shrewdly.

"So. The game has ended. You are the two I was warned of. You play the fools gladly; in retrospect, I am glad I at least had the shrewdness to choose the hermit for you, sir. I sensed in you something of the charlatan."

Charles took a sip of his scotch and then looked at the old woman. "Oh, you know us callous socialites. Pickled livers and soup for brains, the lot of us." He said the words with a deliberate mockery that took everything he had said up until that point in the evening and buried it with a cold-cast iron shovel in desecrated ground.

"I should have realized. You two are in costume twice over, aren't you? You've been playing with me." Sosostris leaned over the table and fixed the pair with a terrible gaze. "Well play with this: I have come prepared to do battle. When I move on, it will be with your souls tucked into my bag."

Charles chuckled. "I say, darling, the old bitch seems to have a red-hot poker shoved right up her ass, doesn't she?"

"I will sic my pack on you both. Snakes will pour from your eyes." Her voice was hoarse, her eyes bright with liquor and fear.

Sylvia looked at Charles, and then kissed him full on the lips. "They all say that when they know they've met their match, don't they, darling?"

Sosostris whirled around and stormed out of the ballroom.

When the old Greek woman was gone, Charles stood up and made a gallant gesture. "May I have this dance, my dear?" The band played on.

In its first moment of existence, the robed and masked figure who appeared in a basement room near the Broadalbin could only hear one thing: the resounding crash of metal arms arcing forward and slamming into crushed and formed wooden pulp. It was the clacking of a typewriter, magnified a thousand-fold to a deafening level. The sound came in slow waves, dripping like molasses onto its head, resounding heavy footfalls of a dread god on a platform of souls. Each strike of a letter carried with it the screams of a thousand people, dreaming, dead, or just lost in the ramshackle metropolis. The figure sank to its knees and grasped its head with both hands. It let out a wail, which began as a deep moan and slowly curled its way up the register until it acquired a piercing quality that rattled the street-level basement windows above its head. Pain was the dominant emotion present in the being's simulacrum of a mind.

It kneeled on the floor, which was soaked with blood. The basement had served as living quarters for an Italian family, immigrants who had passed through Ellis Island less than a year ago. Arriving in the midst of economic desolation, Leonardo Paoli and his

family soon exhausted their savings and were unable to find work. One desperate choice led to another, as the father, mother, and three children—ages three to eight—struggled against the forces arrayed impersonally against them. The extent of their slow decline was beyond knowing, now, and thankfully so; the last member of the Paoli family had died less than half an hour before the robed being appeared. Whatever final card had been dealt, the family's hand was played out: Leonardo had cut his children's throats with a straight razor while they slept, and when his wife awoke and attempted to intervene, he had crazedly slashed her until delivering a killing stroke. Then, as the blood of his mortal kin pooled around him, the family's provider slit his wrists and lay wetly down, sobbing.

Tears fell into the inside of the being's mask and ran down the back of the protruded cheeks, over the lush lips, and pooled at the base of the chin. Finally they fell free of the whole strange assembly, emerging from the bottom of the mask and striking the floor, minutiae in a tangle of bloody expression.

The being's wail died out, replaced with choked sobs. The sadness welled up from the blood on the floor, from the faces of the dead family. Their dreams wormed their way into the flesh of the robed figure, coursed through its strange nervous system that crackled with emotional signals rather than electrical ones, and were processed by the strange, mad brain that lay behind the mask. The figure was an empathic sponge, soaking up the feelings of those around it. Some force of melancholy and despair had called it to this city, to New York of 1935, and in particular had drawn it to this sorry scene.

Paoli blood drove pitons of vision into the being's mind. Lifetimes of striving, of love, of failure, cascaded through. Its defenses against despair were hammered, then destroyed. The floodgates of uselessness and regret were opened, and messages from pens dipped in sorrow were writ large upon the mental sky.

Will this city die? the being thought. *Is there no hope?*

These, it realized, were the questions it was here to answer.

Rising from the muck, the robed figure turned to the door and passed through it, then clopped up the stairs beyond. Arriving at the street-level sidewalk, the figure turned to and fro. It staggered briefly, overcome by the waves of emotion that were flowing across the city. None but it could see the emotional networks of a human society, represented by tangled webs that stretched from every denizen of New York and touched every other. Rather than getting lost in following individual webs—such as those of the late Paoli family—the being focused on the gestalt, willing its mind to rise above the city's countless emotional networks and attempting to derive some consensus view of life therein.

It was not a pretty picture.

Lowering its head, the being turned left and walked steadily towards a beacon.

Towards the Broadalbin.

The stranger in the soiled overcoat descended in the wrought-iron elevator. As he waited, intent, he thrust his hands in his coat pockets. To his mild surprise, one of them contained a revolver. He pulled it out, inspected it. He had no inkling of the weapon's make or model; to him it was simply a gun, pure. But he found that his hands knew it. He swung out the cylinder, checked to see that all six chambers were occupied, spun it, jerked the pistol so that the cylinder snapped back into place, then slipped it once more into his pocket.

"Interesting," he said aloud to no one. "Is it a gun, or is it a dream of a gun?"

He laughed briefly, then cut himself short. The laughter felt strange in his throat. When had he last laughed?

For that matter, when had he last done anything? Had he even existed in all those years since his previous visit to this hotel? Or had he merely coalesced from the shadows of his old life?

The cage of the elevator entered the lobby and slowly came to a halt. He slid open the gate and stepped out.

"Why *there* you are!" a young woman said, standing near the elevator. "I've been waiting simply forever!" She looked no older than sixteen, perhaps, and was in costume as a man—tuxedo, paper mustache, her long hair slicked back tightly and tucked into her shirt.

The stranger smiled at her, bemused by this encounter.

"Am I expected?" he asked genially.

"And how!" she exclaimed. "Let me get a look at you." She took a step back, scrutinized him, brushed something from his collar with one pale, idle hand.

"Well," she said at last. "This will never do. We've got to get you cleaned up. There's a masquerade going on, you know. You simply *have* to get dressed up properly."

"Oh," he replied. "I don't have any other clothes."

"That's all right," she said coyly, stepping forward and pressing herself up against his body. "You can have mine."

The stranger arched an eyebrow. The woman took his hand and led him back into the elevator.

"I—I need to wait in the lobby. I'm expecting someone."

"Well, sure," she said, as she slid the gate closed behind him and pushed a button. The elevator began to ascend. "We won't be very long, I promise."

The stranger swallowed, his mouth dry. He hungered for her now, strangely, improbably, but fiercely all the same. "All right. As long as we're not going to be very long."

As the elevator ascended above the lobby, she drew close again and slipped her arms around his waist. Her tittering laughter sprinkled down beneath them, a light melodious rain of promised pleasure.

Sosostris slammed the door to room 219 furiously. Alexia sat on one of the beds, swinging her legs against the mattress idly. She looked up at the sound.

"Damn their souls," Sosostris muttered darkly.

"Who are they, auntie?" Alexia asked.

Sosostris strode past the bed, past the child, and stood before a window, looking out over the street at night. She placed her hands behind her thick back and rubbed her fingers together.

"Opportunists," she said to the window and, perhaps, to the child on the bed. "Adventurers. Scoundrels. They are here to usurp my plans."

She turned around to face the girl.

"Do you remember Mr. Constantine, child?"

Alexia nodded. "The printer. In London. He gave me chocolates."

"Yes. The printer. He warned me of them. They came to him two years ago, asking to purchase a subscription to his every project. They wanted one of everything he made, indefinitely, and offered a sizable sum. But what they really wanted was one of my decks."

"Aren't they secret?"

"That's just it. I hadn't even heard of Constantine two years ago. There was no way they could have known I would eventually commission him for my project—no normal way, at least. He refused them, and they took revenge. There was a scandal involving a young woman . . . it cost him greatly. But he knew them for who they were. In London they are known as the Horus couple. They enacted a similar scheme once before, on some old friends of mine. That was decades ago. But they have not aged."

Alexia looked at Sosostris, uncomprehending. The old woman walked forward quickly and grasped the child by the shoulders, leaning over her, blocking out the light. Her face was contorted with fear.

"Don't you understand? They have not aged! They *do* not age! They have walked among us since we were dust. And now they are here. For me!"

"Auntie, you're hurting me!"

Sosostris released her steely grip on the child. Alexia rubbed her shoulders, whimpering a little.

"I am sorry, child. Your auntie is upset. Be a good girl and ring for a bottle of sherry, and whatever you want for dinner. Do not speak to me again until I tell you. I must think."

Alexia got up slowly and went to the large black telephone on the little table between the beds. Sosostris returned to the window and resumed her inspection of the street.

"I must think," she said to herself sternly.

In the brief interval while Sosostris was away from the window, the robed figure entered the street. It rounded the corner and strode quickly down the sidewalk. Reaching the Broadalbin, it turned sharply and pushed through the front doors.

A heavyset man in a tuxedo and a domino mask was standing near the entrance, lighting a cigar on the flame from one of the twin gargoyles that flanked the doors. As the robed figure entered, the gargoyles shrieked. One flapped its wings, launched itself up from its perch, and grasped the man's face with its stony claws. He cried out in shock, dropped the cigar, stumbled back, and fell over, fat hands working furiously to pry the thing from his face. His short, thick legs kicked at the air.

The robed figure stopped and looked down at him. The gargoyles were on their perch, unmoving, never having moved in the first place. All was well. The man lying on the floor touched his face with his hands, shook his head, and sat up.

"My God!" he cried, bewildered.

"Yes," the figure said. The pallid mask that was its face betrayed no emotion.

The few other costumed guests in the lobby snickered.

From the front desk at the far end of the lobby, the clerk, Doyle, coughed politely. The robed figure turned away from the confused man on the floor and approached the desk.

Doyle nodded once. "I believe you have a reservation, sir."

"I have a reservation?" the figure asked dully.

Doyle nodded again. He rotated the massive registration book on its swivel so that it faced the figure, and then lifted the thick lump of filled-in pages until the very first page was visible. The very first entry was blank, blank since the day the hotel opened so long ago.

"Will you sign the book, sir?" Doyle offered a pen.

The figure took the pen uncertainly.

"I think I write with a typewriter," it said, sounding faintly confused.

"Of course you do, sir, but a pen will have to do. My apologies. I can have a typewriter sent up, if you wish."

"Sent up?"

"To your room, sir. We've kept it ready for you."

"My room?"

"Please, sir. Just sign the book, and all will be well."

"Sign the book?"

"The book," Doyle said emphatically, jabbing his finger at the blank line where the guest's name would be written. "Sign the book."

The figure looked at Doyle, at the pen, at the book, then back at Doyle again.

"Your *name,* sir. Write your name here."

There was a long pause. Finally the figure spoke, slowly. "I do not know my name."

Doyle smiled patronizingly and let out a little sigh. "Of course, sir. Well. This is a little irregular, but we'll just leave it blank for now. When you figure out what your name is, just come sign the book and all will be well."

"All will be well."

"Why *Charles!*" Sylvia exclaimed from the entrance to the ballroom. "Look who's here!"

Doyle turned the same smile on the attractive couple who were now walking pleasantly towards the desk. Through his gritted teeth he whispered to the robed figure: "*Don't go with them.*"

The figure looked at Doyle, then at the couple as they sauntered up.

"Don't go with them," it said.

Sylvia shot a look at Doyle. "Thank you for your help, *darling,* now why don't you let Charles and I show our new guest around?"

"Of course, madam," the clerk said, still smiling, teeth still clenched. "I'll ring for a bellhop to show him to his room when you're done."

Charles perked up, his soot-smeared face a mask of cheer. "Why I've got just the finest idea, my sweet. Listen, fellow, my wife and I have the penthouse suite. It's far more room than we could ever use. Why don't you stay with us tonight? Perhaps we could play pinochle?"

"Do you play cards?" Sylvia asked.

"We were just looking for a deck, in fact," Charles added.

"The gentleman *has* a room," Doyle interjected.

"Of course he does," Sylvia said, taking the robed figure by the arm. "Now come with me. You simply *must* attend the masquerade."

The couple began to lead the figure away.

"Madam, please!" Doyle barked.

Sylvia looked over her shoulder briefly. "If you feel so strongly about it, Doyle, why don't you come out from behind that desk and join us?"

Doyle glared at her, his hands whitened fists upon the counter. "I *can't,*" he said tightly.

"Ah, well," Sylvia said, resuming their promenade towards the ballroom. "Pity."

The young woman led the stranger to a penthouse suite, working the key in the door with one hand as she massaged him with the other. Her thin mouth was on his, nibbling at his lips and tongue, small moans escaping her throat. When the door popped open they stumbled inside. She closed the door absently with one foot as she wrapped her arms around him, her face on his. They stepped awkwardly away from the door, into the darkened room, then fell onto a sofa.

"*Yes,*" she muttered, as she straddled him on the couch. He was erect and warm, the confusion of his mind utterly erased, replaced by nothing more than white-hot desire. She undid his pants and pulled them down as he ripped open her shirt, buttons popping onto the carpet. Her hand slipped between his legs, working up and down, and he gasped. "*Yes,*" she said again, undoing her tuxedo pants with her free hand as he groped at her small breasts, his face holding back nothing: he *was* desire, incarnate.

Then she took him inside her. He cried out in pleasure, she matched his cry, her eyes rolled back into her head.

Her eyes kept rolling. They rotated slowly back, back, until they had made a full reversal.

Her true eyes shone forth.

They were perfectly, fully red, from side to side. A slick, deep red, like the flesh of two small mouths.

He gasped, cried out again, she cried louder, clenching his body with her powerful legs. Her mouth worked, chanting in some unknown language. The flesh of her breasts parted and his hands slid inside her body, now the consistency of clay. He tried to withdraw them but couldn't, screaming now, as she rocked atop him, and he could feel his soul welling up at the base of his spine, gathering for a complete tantric discharge through his cock, to be drawn into her, utterly. She would devour him. There was the sound of tearing fabric, and the back of her tuxedo split as two great fleshy wings unfurled. She beat her wings in the air, using their force to drive her onto him, harder and faster.

Finally he wrested a hand free, pulled it gooey and dripping from her malleable form, fumbled it into the pocket of his coat, lifted it up still in the pocket, and pulled the trigger.

The explosion was tremendous. The shot blew through her mid-section, perforating a wing behind her, and she let loose with an utterly inhuman shriek. Involuntarily she flapped up, lifting off of him, off of the couch, colliding with the ceiling in her panic. He pulled the gun from his pocket as she wrapped her arms around her injured body, the human side of her eyes rolling back to look at him in shock and fury, and then a gaping red wound appeared in her brow as another explosion propelled a round through her head. He rolled off the couch just as she dropped, and on impact her body liquified, splashing an indeterminate matter onto the cushions, the carpet, and onto him.

He crawled away from the couch, scurrying like an animal, keening, until he reached the comfort of the far wall. He sat up quickly against the wall, holding the revolver out in front of him sobbing, dimly aware of his bobbing penis, his pants still down around his knees.

This is a story, he thought desperately. *This is one of my stories. I am not here. This is not happening. This is not a gun. It is a dream of a gun.*

Then he spoke aloud, his voice choked with sobs: "*This is not a dream.*"

Charles and Sylvia Lord glided into the ballroom, holding the arms of the robed figure between them. On the dance floor, a dozen couples traced intricate patterns of motion and delight. Beyond, the marionette band expertly played a Schubert waltz. The conductor wore a tuxedo and the mask of a blue jay, a corkscrew dangling from his neck on a slender silver chain; he doubled as the hotel's sommelier. No one paid any attention to the trio in the doorway.

"Isn't it marvelous?" Sylvia asked her guest.

"Marvelous," it said.

"Why don't the two of you dance, my dear?" Charles said. "I'm going to the bar for a drink."

"A fine idea!" Sylvia exclaimed. "Let's dance."

"Let's dance," it said.

Charles walked off, a little drunkenly, towards the bar. Sylvia led the figure onto the dance floor, placed one of its hands on her waist and took the other in hers, and they began to move. At first Sylvia took the lead. But after a minute the figure seemed to find its bearings, some part of its mind bubbling up dim memories of a nightclub, a place called the AmHoTep, the memory of another time, another life, and it took the lead. They danced and danced, swirling among the other dancers as the band struck up a faster tune.

Eventually the song was done. The dancers stopped and applauded gaily. The conductor lurched around on his strings and took a bow.

"Marvelous band, don't you think?" Sylvia asked.

"Marvelous," it said.

The conductor clapped his wooden hands together. "And now," the marionette said, in a voice that came from somewhere else, "it is time."

A musician stood up and took a few steps over to a large brass gong. The puppet took a mallet and swung it against the metal. One. Two. Three.

"It is time," Sylvia said pleasantly.

Four. Five. Six.

"It is time," the figure said.

Seven. Eight. Nine.

"It is time," the other dancers said in unison.

"It is time," the figure said.

Ten. Eleven. Twelve.

"Midnight!" cried the conductor marionette. "Remove your masks, and see who you have been dancing with!"

The dancers all removed their masks and laughed at the spectacle. The musicians all removed their masks and their wooden mouths clacked open and shut as they clapped politely.

All the dancers had removed their masks. All save one. The robed figure stood still, looking around at the crowd, who all looked back at it expectantly.

Sylvia smiled widely, all teeth, reveling in the moment. When she spoke, it was not simple speech. It was a recital, a quotation of lines from an old and obscure work.

"'You, sir, should unmask.'" Her voice rang echoing in the hall.

"Indeed?" it replied.

"'Indeed it is time. We have all lain aside disguise but you.'"

"I wear no mask."

Her eyes were alight with expectation. "'No mask?'" she began—

—the explosion of the gunshot was deafening. Someone screamed.

In the doorway stood the stranger, his overcoat damp with some foul ichor, one hand stretched up, the pistol directed at the ceiling.

"That will be enough," he said.

"Bastard!" Sylvia shrieked. "Bastard!"

The stranger leveled the gun at her and walked forward swiftly. "I said, that will be enough." He took the robed figure by the arm roughly with his free hand and pulled it fro the dance floor. "My friend and I are *leaving.*"

There was a knock at the door of room 219. Alexia opened it.

In the hallway stood a marionette dressed in the uniform of a bellhop. Strings ran u into the tracks of the ceiling. Before the marionette stood a serving cart covered by a white tablecloth, on which rested a bottle of sherry, a glass, and a covered dish containing the child's dinner.

Alexia smiled. "Thank you," she said politely, pulling the cart into the room. The bellhop stood there in the doorway, not moving.

"I said, thank you," Alexia replied, a little confused.

The bellhop did not move.

"Auntie?" Alexia called to the bathroom. "The bellhop won't leave."

Madame Sosostris emerged into the room. She glanced at the bellhop quickly to ascertain that yes, there were strings involved. "Well? What is it?"

The bellhop tilted its head to one side briefly, as if beckoning her.

"Oh, very well." She walked up to the marionette and leaned close.

The puppet's mouth clacked open and shut. Alexia could hear a low whispering, but could not make out what was being said.

Sosostris stood up straight again, sharply. "I see. That will be fine."

The bellhop bowed briefly and then spun off down the hall, herky-jerky. Sosostris closed the door.

"What did he want?" Alexia asked.

Sosostris snorted. "It seems Doyle is not so great a fool as I presumed. He wants my help."

"To do what?"

"Never you mind, child. Eat your dinner. I will return shortly." And she left the room

The drama passed, costumed revelers resumed their dance as the unmasked band swung into an up-tempo number. Charles and Sylvia walked slowly into the lobby.

"Well," Charles said quietly. "That didn't work so well, did it?"

"No," his wife replied, her face tight with anger. "It didn't. But it was worth a try."

"Now what?"

"No doubt Wilde has it, in his room. He's already convinced that fool to help him. Sosostris is the wild card now."

"I don't exactly think she's favorably inclined towards us, my dear."

"Of course not. She'll either join him or oppose him. Either way, the Phantom will end up in the labyrinth. We'll catch it there, or beyond. First let's see what's happened to Hypatia."

They crossed the lobby towards the elevator. As they passed the front desk, Sylvia glanced at Doyle and sneered.

"What are *you* smiling about, you ass?"

Doyle shuffled some papers and said nothing. His eyes spoke volumes.

Sosostris descended the servant's stairs at the back end of the second floor. She walked through the kitchen, where a half-dozen marionettes tended to simmering pots or prepared drinks for the guests, paying no attention to this woman—this human—in their midst. Exiting the kitchen, she navigated swiftly through the staff area until she emerged in the shadows to one side of the front desk, hidden from the lobby. Doyle stood nearby, drumming his fingers on the countertop, but did not look at her.

"Well?" she asked tersely.

"We've had a bit of excitement," he replied quietly, still keeping his attention focused on the countertop so that no one in the lobby would notice their conversation.

"And?"

"The Phantom is here. Wilde has it in his room."

"Already?" Sosostris barked.

"Already. He has the author on his side. Wilde sent him to wrest the Phantom away from the Horus couple."

"Why tell me this? I'm not here to help you or Ingmar."

Doyle flinched at the name. "My employer's only interest is in seeing things unfold as they should. Wilde is an usurper."

"And I'm not? You must know my plan, surely."

"Of course. Where Wilde seeks to usurp, you seek only to amend. Your success or failure is of no consequence to us. But we need the Phantom freed. It has work to do."

"Very well. I will pay a call on Wilde, and maneuver him to my advantage. I would do so in any event. But if your staff will assist me when I need them, I will set the Phantom free."

"Our influence extends only through the whisper labyrinth. If the Phantom goes beyond, our truce with you will be at an end. There would be repercussions."

"I need the Phantom only to find the path. Beyond that, I have brought my own magic."

"Then we have a deal."

"Just so."

Mr. Wilde sat in the big armchair, the threads that ran to his limbs hanging limp. The stranger sat on the edge of the neatly-made bed, passing the revolver from one hand to the other nervously. The Phantom lay on the floor, collapsed in a heap of silken yellow robes. The mask that was its face was pressed against the floor. Its body showed no signs of breath.

Mr. Wilde's wooden head clattered. "That's long enough. It's no more unconscious than you and I are dreaming. Get it up."

The stranger lay the gun down on the bed and stood up. He stepped over to the Phantom and grabbed it by the arms, pulling it up into a sitting position and leaning it against the bed. Then the stranger walked over to the armchair where Mr. Wilde sat and put one elbow up on the top of the chair, leaning comfortably against its bulk.

"You're here with us now, Phantom," said Mr. Wilde, "in the Broadalbin. You'll be here just a little while."

From behind the mask, the voice came. "So will we all. For a while."

Mr. Wilde nodded. "That's one thing it's told us. I suppose we have the night, at least, before the last king comes."

The stranger pulled out a cigarette case—another surprise possession, but one he did not even notice this time—and lit up. He offered one to Wilde, who cocked his head at an odd angle and blinked his wooden eyelids, twice.

"I don't think so. No lungs, you know."

"No heart, you know," the Phantom said. "The city. It has no heart."

Mr. Wilde's jaw clacked open and shut a couple of times, which he had learned to do in lieu of a smile.

"Oh no," he said. "The city has a heart. A dark heart. You're in the thick of it, my friend. This hotel is where it beats. The Broadalbin. The front door is the valve. It pumps the blood of our lives in, draws forth all the joy, and then it pumps it out again."

The stranger strode over to the Phantom, and pressed the end of the lit cigarette against the mask. Smoke drifted off in a slim tendril as the burning embers of tobacco scorched the surface.

"It's no good," Mr. Wilde said. "That sort of pain is beyond this being. It's been tried."

"I know that," the stranger said. "I just wanted to mark it. Brand it. It belongs to us now."

The Phantom looked from the stranger to Mr. Wilde, its blank face seemingly still questioning what was to happen, what was on the minds of its captors. Its true thoughts were a mystery.

"We have other forms of pain, sir," Mr. Wilde said. "We have other ways of bringing the truth from your still lips."

"Idle threats," the Phantom said.

"You can give us now that which we seek, or you can find out how idle our threats are.

I've been waiting for you for decades. Do you really think I wouldn't be prepared? Do you really think I wouldn't have taken the time and effort required to learn that which will make you suffer?"

"It's all the same in the end," the Phantom said.

"True. In the end, it's all the same," Mr. Wilde replied.

His hollow body leaned forward in the seat, in response to the sudden taut pull of certain threads.

"The question is, how will we pass the time from now until the end?"

Mr. Wilde sat back in the chair.

The stranger moved over to a cupboard, opened it, and from its interior removed a bottle. It was a decanter, about eight inches tall, and opaque. On the front of the bottle was affixed a small brass plaque, blank. Carrying it, he walked back over to Mr. Wilde's armchair and resumed leaning against it. The Phantom followed the stranger's progress, its attention intent upon the bottle.

"Oh yes," Mr. Wilde said. "We found it. Now I repeat: the question is, how will we pass the time from now until the end?"

The Phantom was silent, but its mask seemed to tremble. It shook its head once from side to side.

Mr. Wilde looked up at the stranger.

"And should I then presume?"

He looked back at the Phantom.

"And how should I begin?"

The Phantom shuddered, and turned its face to the floor.

"I think now," Mr. Wilde said, "and this is how."

The stranger opened the bottle.

In room 219, Alexia had eaten as much of her dinner as she cared to. She took out her book, *The House at Pooh Corner,* and read for a few minutes. It was not long before Sosostris returned.

"Get your coat on, girl," she said abruptly as she seized her bag. "It's time to go."

"Can I bring my book?" Alexia asked.

Sosostris made a disapproving face. "Animist idolatry. Leave it here. You'll have no time to read."

Jaycy Linz opened his eyes, but the darkness retreated only a little. There was something over his face, and light stole in from the edges.

"Take it off," a voice said, accompanied by curious clacking sounds.

There was the sound of someone moving, and then there were fingers at his brows, tugging at the thing over Jaycy's face. He raised a hand, confused, and then the thing was

torn free, threads ripping at the edges.

He was sitting on the floor of a hotel room. The Broadalbin. A dirty and disheveled man was standing over him, holding what he now saw to be a mask. His own clothes were unfamiliar, some sort of robe in yellow silk. Then he saw the other man in the room, seated in a chair, and he closed his eyes for a moment, trying to will away the sight.

"I am Mr. Wilde," the other man said, his puppet head regarding him curiously. "Welcome back, Mr. Linz."

The dirty man stepped back and tossed the mask onto the bed, next to an opened bottle. He picked up a revolver and hefted it, his face blank.

"What is this?" Jaycy asked.

"You were gone for a little while," Wilde said. "You should thank us for thus recalling you to yourself."

"Thanks," Jaycy replied, with a snort.

"You may dispense with the sarcasm, sir. We have need of you. You must show us the path through the whisper labyrinth."

"And if I don't?"

"Then my associate here will kill you, and another will take your place, sooner or later. It's a simple choice. And I am a patient man."

There was a knock at the door. The stranger jerked the gun towards the sound.

Wilde waved his hand. "It's all right. Just that Greek fortune-teller, here to make her play."

"Who?" the stranger asked.

Wilde shook his head. "Leave it to me," he said, and stood up, pulled by strings. He ambled over to the door and fumbled with the knob. The door swung open.

"Hello, puppet man," Sosostris said, Alexia at her side.

"Hello, madam. A pleasure to see you again."

"May we come in?"

"Of course." Wilde stood to the side and allowed the pair entrance. He closed the door behind them.

"Sit in the corner," Sosostris said to her charge. "Say nothing." Alexia took her place as directed.

"Who is the boy?" Wilde asked, a question he already knew the answer to.

"My nephew, Alex. He is assisting me."

"He is part of this?"

"A small part, but yes." She looked down at Jaycy, still sitting on the floor against the bed. "What's happened to him?"

"He had a sudden seizure of self-knowledge," the stranger replied, smiling a little, gun pointing nowhere in particular.

"Oh, it's you," Sosostris said to him absently, then returned her attention to Jaycy. "You

must be something special to be tasked with such responsibility."

"Whatever."

"So Wilde, I don't see that we have anything to gain from opposition. Shall we go?"

"Of course, madam," Wilde replied.

The stranger looked up at Wilde. "I thought you couldn't leave this room?"

Sosostris walked over to him, and looked deep into his eyes. "He can't, not as he is. But it's not an insurmountable problem."

"I don't understand."

"It's all right," she said. Her voice was soothing, but she held his gaze with a look of iron. "Everything is all right."

Wilde had drifted slowly behind the stranger. As the man started to ask another question, wrestling to free himself from the woman's eyes, Wilde lifted his hands to the sides of his face. With a sudden motion and a skillful orchestration of strings, Wilde wrenched off his own head, pried it open at an inner hinge beneath the sculpted gray hair, and then brought it down over the stranger's head, snapping it shut like the jaws of a bear trap.

The stranger cried out and grabbed at the wooden mask, dropping the gun to the floor. Trickles of blood ran down his neck. He wailed, voice muffled by the mask, and tried to pull the thing off. Jaycy leapt up to the door. Sosostris stood still and watched.

Wilde's headless body collapsed to the floor, followed by all his strings, severed now. The strings attached to his head fell also. The stranger lowered his hands and took a deep breath. Jaycy threw the door open and found six bellhops, massed in the hallway outside.

"That's better," Wilde said, his voice now that of the stranger. "It has been so very, very long since last I drew breath."

Jaycy closed the door.

Wilde picked up the gun and then looked at Jaycy and Sosostris. "Yes. So. It's time to go."

The two were silent, but Sosostris smiled. Alexia picked at some lint on her coat.

"Perhaps you should go first, madam. You seem to have allies in this hotel, and they would no doubt feel better about our errand if they knew you were at its head."

A few minutes later, the strange foursome emerged from the elevator into the basement beneath the Broadalbin. Sosostris lead the way, Alexia at her heels. Jaycy followed, his brow furrowed, trailed by Wilde and his revolver. Wilde smoked a cigarette as he walked, reveling in the sensation.

Two bellhops emerged from a darkened doorway. Sosostris nodded to them and they nodded in return, then led the group back through where the pair had emerged.

They passed through a series of rooms and doors, moving in silence. No one save Alexia paid any attention to the marvels they passed, but even she knew better than to ask questions.

Charles and Sylvia emerged from behind an ornate screen depicting scenes from the *Tao Te Ching*. They followed at a discreet distance.

I suppose you never expected to see this place again, Mr. Linz," Wilde said, his voice muffled a little by the mask.

"No. I can't say as I did."

They stood within a chamber carved from rock, illuminated by flickering torches. Two more rough-hewn hallways led off into shadows. Four small niches carved into the walls held ornate bottles, like the one in Wilde's room, each with a brass nameplate affixed to the front; unlike the bottle in Wilde's room, all were marked with their owner's names.

"Where are we?" Alexia asked.

"The whisper labyrinth," Sosostris replied. Her eyes sparkled as she took in the sight. "This is the doorway to the beyond."

Wilde chuckled. His puppet mouth no longer moved, but then he no longer had need of it. It hung open, revealing the fleshy lips and chin of his new body.

"You needn't be so melodramatic, madam. Our destination is hardly a mystery. Uttering its name will not turn you to stone."

"You say it then," she challenged guardedly.

"Very well." He looked at Alexia. "Carcosa, boy. We're going to Carcosa."

The bellhops took a step back at this utterance.

"Even they fear it," Wilde said, and laughed. "How quaint."

"Bad luck," Sosostris said, making a little warding motion in the air with her hands. "It is bad luck to be the first in the room to speak its name."

"You can take the girl out of the village, but you can't take the village out of the girl, eh? I wouldn't have thought you so provincial, madam, yet I suppose those who make their living from superstition must honor it themselves."

Sosostris spat. "You would do well to honor things you do not understand. You are no more the master of that city than I am."

"Not yet, anyway."

She nodded gravely. "Not yet."

Wilde turned back to Jaycy. "It's time, my boy. Show us what you've got. Show us the path."

Jaycy looked at Wilde, then at Sosostris, then back to Wilde again. "You think I can find it? You people are nuts."

"You found it before."

"The hell I did. Someone showed me the way."

"Precisely. The gift passes from one to the next. Start walking. Flip a coin if you like. You can't help but take us there, now. Any direction you walk will be the right one. And you have no choice in any event." Wilde raised the gun slightly to make his point.

Jaycy shook his head. "The woman is right, puppet man. You're a fool. You orchestrate all of this and then it comes down to just threatening me with a gun? Pathetic. You'd no sooner shoot me than you would take that mask off."

Wilde raised the gun and fired.

The shot caught Jaycy in the left arm. The sound was tremendous. Alexia screamed. Jaycy grabbed his arm and dropped to his knees, wailing, then collapsed to the floor. He pissed himself and the smell rose off him, acrid in the cool subterranean air.

"The situation is fluid and I must adapt, Mr. Linz. The devil is in the details and I am not the devil. But nothing is going to prevent me from reaching my goal." He looked at the two bellhops, who flinched at the mention of Carcosa but who did make the slightest motion at the sound of the shot. "Pick him up."

The pair of marionettes looked at Sosostris, who nodded. They shuffled over to Jaycy and wrenched him up by the waist. He cried out, tears running down his face.

"Now *move,*" Wilde called sharply. "Left or right? What will it be?"

Jaycy wept, clutching the bleeding wound, standing unsteadily in the bellhops' silken arms.

"Left or right, Mr. Linz? You still have another arm."

"Left!" Jaycy cried. "Left, you son of a bitch!"

"That's better," Wilde said calmly. "Left it is."

There was a succession of rooms and corridors, all alike save for the names on the bottles. The torches guttered at the group's passing. A chill breeze issued from first one direction, then another. From somewhere far above, there was a very distant sound of music—a waltz.

Jaycy stumbled along in the lead, helped by the two marionettes. He still stank of piss and blood, and sometimes he would move too fast and yelp at the pain from his arm. No one commented on his discomfort.

After a passage of some minutes, Jaycy led them into a chamber with a distinction not held by any room they had yet been through: a blank wall, with no niche or bottle in its expanse. The others shuffled in behind him, then they all paused to await whatever would happen next.

"Well?" Wilde asked, impatient.

Jaycy stepped up to the wall, the marionettes releasing their grip and moving off to one side.

"This is it," he said, nodding at the blankness.

"I don't see anything."

"It's right there," Jaycy insisted. Then they all saw it.

The wall was not blank, not anymore. It was sundered by a slashing passage that led upwards, rough steps hacked from the rock. The breeze was stronger now, and came from above.

"At last," Wilde said, his voice alive with pleasure.

"The passage," Sosostris said.

"Carcosa," Alexia whispered. The marionettes glided over behind the child, unnoticed, then stood there in silence.

"Yeah," Jaycy cut in harshly. "Carcosa. Unreal city. It's up there. Can I go now?"

"No, Mr. Linz," Wilde said. "I still have need of you."

The marionettes rustled slightly.

"We can find the palace on our own," Sosostris said quietly. "My nephew can take us there."

"Of course he can. It's what we find there that concerns me. Mr. Linz contains potency that I need for my work. He's coming with us."

Sosostris considered this for a moment, then spoke. "Very well."

The marionettes rustled again. There was a faint grinding of gears, of some mechanism cocking.

"Go!" Sosostris yelled, shoving Jaycy forward, ignoring his grunt of pain at the sudden movement. She and Wilde followed swiftly.

Halfway up the stairs she stopped and looked back. Alexia still stood at the bottom of the stairs, the marionettes behind her.

"Come on, Alex," she said hurriedly. "Come *on.*"

Alexia stepped forward to the base of the stairs, then stopped and looked back at the marionettes.

"I'm not waiting for you, old woman!" Wilde called from above.

"Alex! Now!"

The marionettes looked at the girl, then at Sosostris. Their voices came in disembodied unison.

"There will be repercussions."

Alexia ran forward and up the stairs, into the sloping passage where there were no tracks in the ceiling. Sosostris grabbed her and pulled the child up the stairs alongside her, leaving the curious pair behind.

The two marionettes regarded each other for a moment, then moved off through one of the hallways. From another, Charles and Sylvia emerged and followed the others up the stairs.

Carcosa was a ferocious marvel. The city extended in all directions, cobblestone streets and a jumble of architecture. The sky was a dim, leaden gray, black stars dotting its surface. There were no sounds, no movement, no sign of occupancy.

"We are here," Wilde said softly.

"It's beautiful," Sosostris replied.

"You people are idiots," Jaycy barked. "You don't know what the hell you're doing! This place will eat you alive."

"You made it through all right," Wilde said.

"Yeah, I did. But I had a patron."

"You have a new patron, now. You'll listen to me if you know what's good for you."

Jaycy laughed in his face. "*Soup* is good for me. You're a god-damned *tumor.*"

Wilde moved like lightning, punching Jaycy right in the bullet wound on his arm. Jaycy yelled and his legs gave out, dropping him to the ground again. He clutched the injury, bleeding afresh, and tears welled up in his eyes. He clenched his teeth and forced out the words.

"This is not going to go well for you, Mr. Wilde."

"That's my problem. Get up, you pathetic weakling. We can't waste time on you."

Sosostris and Alexia watched this from a few careful steps removed, not wanting to interfere. As Jaycy regained his feet and stood, clutching the wound, Sosostris looked around, startled.

"It's changed," she said, awed.

The others looked around. When they emerged, they were across from a red brick townhouse with white windows. Now that building was gone, replaced by a small plaza with a fountain in the middle. Statues of children stood there, water spraying from their eyes.

Sosostris made the warding motion again. Jaycy grimaced, his best effort at a smile given the pain.

"Which way now, huh? Left? Right? Anybody bring a Baedeker's?"

"Shut up," said Wilde. Jaycy got quiet, but he looked resentful.

"Alex," Sosostris said, kneeling down to the girl. "You remember what I told you?"

"My sister is here," Alexia replied.

"That's right. Find your sister, my dear. You'll know the way."

Alexia looked all around, and at last pointed. "That way."

"She's there?"

"Yes. I can hear her."

The street was silent. But Alexia was alert, head cocked to one side, listening to something the others could not catch.

Wilde shook his head. "I hope you know what you're doing."

Sosostris stood up confidently. "You made your preparations, sir, and I made mine."

Alexia led them true. They navigated through the city swiftly, doing their best to ignore the mysteries they passed, just as they had in the basements of the Broadalbin. All around them, the city moved, alive. Nothing changed while they looked at it, but everything they were not looking at changed. Streets became parks, houses became mansions. Schools of architecture warred with each other, the only constant a fluid upheaval of form and function. All of this transpired in silence.

Almost silence.

Sosostris noticed it first—the sound of footsteps behind them, stopping and starting She began to breathe a little faster, her great fleshy heart beat a little quicker. At every cor she would glance behind, hoping to catch sight of those who followed, but she never saw thing. Every time she looked back, the street behind them bore no resemblance to the str they had just walked through. She was disoriented. She was afraid.

Finally, as they neared the shore of a great black lake that stretched to the horizon, sh stopped and hissed at Wilde. He drew close.

"We are being followed," she said quietly.

"The marionettes?"

"No. Something far worse. I thought we'd left them at the hotel, but they're here. I know it."

"Who?"

"They who come from the dust and they who go to the grave. The autumn people."

Wilde grew annoyed. "What in the hell are you talking about, woman?"

Sosostris's eyes were haunted. "The Horus couple."

Wilde just stared at her for a moment.

"Really."

"Yes. I met them in the ballroom. It did not go well."

"So . . . you're afraid of them?"

"Of course! They've walked the earth since the old days. Their powers are beyond belief."

"Wait. Wait a moment."

"What?"

"I'm trying to remember how the rest of it went . . . they devour souls with chocolat and they ferment liquor of hope made flesh? Right?"

"Then you know of them."

Wilde laughed, loudly. "Of course I know of them, you old fool. They were my *clien*

Sosostris stared at him, uncomprehending.

"You know my old trade. They hired me, long ago. All that nonsense you're spouting those were just rumors. Rumors my network of agents spread on their behalf."

"But they are as old as time!"

"Hardly. They're no older than you are. Just better preserved. They're dabblers, sorcerers. They couldn't muster a reputation on their own, so they paid me to do it. Is it really them? I haven't seen them this century."

"Are you serious?"

"Of course I'm serious. They're nothing. They're stagehands. Deal with them if you like; my contract with them is long since expired."

Sosostris stood and thought, very hard, for a few moments. At last she smiled.

"You were good, weren't you?"

"The best," Wilde said proudly.

"Then I will deal with them, and harshly at that. Wait here."

"I won't wait long."

"I won't need long."

Charles and Sylvia crouched behind the corner of a building. Sylvia glanced around the edge for a moment.

"They're just standing there," she whispered. "I think they're waiting on something."

Charles looked ashen and sweaty. "I don't like this place."

"I don't either! This is not going well."

"One of them has a gun!"

"I know! Shut up! I'm thinking. We just have to keep following them and look for an opportunity."

"Do you even know what we're doing? This was supposed to be easy!"

"Nothing worth doing is easy, you coward. We're playing for the big stakes now."

"I need a drink."

"I said shut up!" Sylvia looked around the corner again. "They're still just standing there. Wait—someone's missing."

"I'm right here," Sosostris called from the other end of the block, bag in hand.

"Oh Christ," Charles muttered. Sylvia kicked him and then put on a fierce smile.

"Hello again," she called merrily. "Fancy meeting you here."

Sosostris walked towards them confidently. They stood up as she approached, halving the distance before stopping again.

"So, my dears. Fancy another reading? I'd be happy to use the full deck this time."

"That's all right," Charles said. "Thanks for the offer."

"Really. I insist." She set her bag down and began digging through it.

"Stop!" Sylvia cried. Around her, a host of phantasms gathered, leering shadows of bone and claw. "My friends will get angry."

Sosostris looked up absently, regarding the spectres with indifference. "Very well." She picked up her bag and walked forward again until they stood close together. The shadows loomed.

Sylvia stared at her, hard. "Why don't you give us your deck, darling, and we'll be on our way? There's no need for unpleasantness. My friends can be ugly, if provoked."

"You mean those things?" Sosostris said calmly. She made a motion with her free hand and the shadows vanished.

Charles and Sylvia looked around, nervous.

"Parlor tricks. Houdini could out you with his hands tied behind his back."

"What do you mean?" Sylvia asked, trying to sound imposing.

"Mr. Wilde is my ally, now. You are no longer in disguise. I know what you are."

Charles gulped. "And what are we?"

Sosostris smiled, her jagged teeth yellow in the dim light.

"*You* are *mine.*"

The screaming startled Jaycy, who whipped around and looked in the direction of the sound. "Jesus! What the hell is that?"

Wilde stood idly, picking lint off his clothes, smiling a little.

After a few moments the screaming stopped. Sosostris appeared from around a corner and walked back to the group. She glanced briefly at Alexia, who was watching the lake intently. Jaycy noticed that her bag seemed to jump a little in her hands, as if it contained small animals. But perhaps it was just a trick of the light.

"Can we go now?" Wilde asked.

"We can. Thank you."

"My pleasure, madam."

"Alex? Where now?"

Alexia pointed at the lake. "There," she said. They all looked.

There was a boat on the lake.

It was small craft, a rowboat of sorts. A figure stood in the boat and worked a great oar.

"Who is that?" Wilde asked, curious.

"My sister," Alexia said.

"She's rather tall."

"That's not my sister. My sister is the other one."

The boat grunted ashore, coming to rest on the beach. The figure in the boat wore a black cloak, and beckoned to them. There was something else in the boat, a small shape that sat behind the cloaked ferryman.

Sosostris led the way, Alexia at her side. The little girl was smiling now.

The group walked down to the beach and approached the boat. As they grew closer, they heard a clacking and a whirring of machinery from the craft. Wilde stopped, startled, but Alexia ran forward, laughing.

"Wait!" Wilde said, uncertain.

"It's all right," Sosostris said. "Let him go."

"Who *is* that?"

"I have no idea who the ferryman is. It's not important. But the other one is Alex's sister. That's how—that's how he led us here. Once we came, they could not be kept apart."

Alexia jumped onto the boat and clambered past the ferryman. She embraced the small figure that stood behind.

As the others drew near, they could finally see.

Alexia was in the arms of another child, a little girl her size. She laughed some more and talked animatedly to the little child.

The little child made of clockwork.

"Oh hell," Jaycy said. "Now what?"

Sosostris stood and watched the happy pair. "They were separated at birth, you could say. One is the shadow of the other, as our world is the shadow of Carcosa. They are lodestone and iron, drawing each other across the spaces between the stars."

Wilde chuckled. "Your nephew is a little witchfinder."

"Of a sort. Let's get on board. This boat will take us to the palace."

As they stepped aboard, the cloaked figure touched Jaycy's arm. He looked up, startled. The pain went away, the wound silently healed. The figure pulled back its hood slightly and put a finger to its lips. Her lips.

Jaycy stared. "*Debra?*" he whispered.

She nodded silently, then lowered the hood and took up the oar again. Jaycy sat down at her feet and stared up at her, quiet.

"We're going to the palace," Sosostris said boldly from the bench at the bow of the craft. "Take us there."

The ferryman—ferry*woman*—nodded and began to work the oar. The boat pulled off the shore and set out onto the water.

Alexia burbled happily, saying how she'd missed her sister. The clockwork child clacked its mouth open and shut, gears whirring in her little body, chubby porcelain hands stroking her sister's hair, red tears streaming down her face.

The boat moved on. To the palace.

The imperial palace of Yhtill was alight with life and joy. It was the night of the great masquerade, when the royal family gathered with the nobles and courtiers for a ball. Rumors of the strange visitor who had lately arrived at the palace had passed through the assembled guests, rumors of the masked emissary and his masked retinue, who had arrived from some unknown city with tidings from his lord.

The ferrywoman's boat arrived at a small dock, and sentries in fine uniforms assisted the group in stepping ashore. Alexia and her sister were among them.

"It's beautiful," Wilde said, staring up at the spires of the palace, so tall that the moon seemed to pass beneath their final heights.

"It's doomed," Jaycy said. "We all know how this ends."

"We all know how this ended, you mean," Wilde said, still staring in awe at the sight. "Things will go differently tonight."

"What do you mean?"

"You'll see."

The sentries directed them to the entrance, where a knot of costumed revelers were even now walking through. They followed the guests.

The halls of the palace were blanketed in mirrors from floor to ceiling. The bustling

crowds that filled them were full of drink and pleasure. Jaycy soon noticed that there were people in the mirrors who were not present in the hall. When he realized one of them was himself, but dressed in his old street clothes, he shut his eyes and looked away. Afterwards he kept his attention on the floor.

Sosostris excused herself for a few minutes. They waited in the hall, drowned in the noise of the crowd. Alexia and her sister played tag, darting and clacking through the guest When Sosostris returned, her bag was gone. She carried the tarot box in one hand and Jaycy's mask in the other, and she wore a gown of brilliant red silk. She approached Wilde and handed him the mask.

Wilde nodded. "Perfect."

"Where's your garment?" she asked, curious.

"I don't need one. The only symbology I need is that of my vassal," he said, nodding a Jaycy, who was staring at the floor out of earshot. "Everything else I have up here." He tapped his wooden mask.

"I won't be able to help you ascend. I have my own working to do."

"Your help will not be needed. Mr. Linz!"

Jaycy turned abruptly, and started a little when he saw Sosostris. He walked over.

"Yes?"

"It's time for you to go, Mr. Linz. Time for the Phantom to return." He held out the mas

Jaycy took it. "So I can leave?"

"Almost. A few more minutes and then you'll be on your own. But put the mask on now."

Jaycy stared into his eyes, searching for something. He wanted to leave here, to return to the boat, to ask Debra a thousand questions. But he feared the answers. And he knew what he had to do. Finally he smiled, a small, slight smile of resignation, acknowledging hi role in the unfolding drama.

"All right. Let's get this over with."

He put the mask back on.

The transformation was subtle. He shivered for a moment, then steadied, then looked about.

"Welcome back," Wilde said confidently.

The figure looked at him, its face quite literally a mask.

"Welcome back," it said dully.

Wilde smiled his devil's smile. "Now. Let's go."

They passed into the grand ballroom, where hundreds danced and laughed and ate. A the far end of the room was the royal court, surveying the crowd with regal approval Servants in silken robes moved through the crowd, expertly delivering drinks and assistance. Sosostris noted that their robes were identical to the marionettes of the hotel.

In the middle of the hall, on a dias, a small orchestra in formal wear and feathered bird masks played a lively tune. The conductor whipped his baton back and forth, the corkscrew hanging from a silver chain around his neck bobbing up and down with the motion of his arms. They were not puppets, but men. This was not the shadow, but the real. This was not a dream.

"At last," Wilde said, sighing. "At last."

Sosostris looked around warily. The phantom stood mute.

Eventually the song was done. The dancers stopped and applauded gaily. The conductor turned around gracefully and took a bow. Then he clapped his fleshy hands together. "And now," he said, in a voice that carried throughout the ballroom, "it is time."

A musician stood up and took a few steps over to a large brass gong. He took a mallet and swung it against the metal. One. Two. Three.

"It is time," Wilde said.

Four. Five. Six.

"It is time," the phantom said.

Seven. Eight. Nine.

"It is time," the other dancers said in unison.

"It is time," Sosostris said.

"It is time," Alexia whispered to her sister.

Ten. Eleven. Twelve.

"Midnight!" cried the conductor. "Remove your masks, and see who you have been dancing with!"

The dancers all removed their masks and laughed at the spectacle. The musicians all removed their masks and clapped politely.

All the dancers had removed their masks. All save two. One stood with Wilde and Sosostris to the side of the hall, unnoticed. The other was a robed figure who stood still at the front of the hall, among Camilla and Cassilda of the royal family, looking around at the crowd, who all looked back at it expectantly.

Camilla addressed the robed man. "You, sir, should unmask." Her voice rang echoing in the hall.

"Indeed?" it replied.

"Indeed it is time. We have all lain aside disguise but you."

"I wear no mask."

"No mask?" She looked at Cassilda. "No mask?"

The cathedral windows above the royal family exploded, showering glass upon them all. A gust of wind blew in from the darkness outside. Camilla screamed.

"Now!" Wilde yelled, grabbing the phantom by the hand and pulling it forward. Sosostris followed.

A great form billowed in through the gaping windows, a tatterdemalion form in yellow rags that drifted down to the throne and sat there.

The masked figure looked at Camilla. "The last king is come," it said. She quivered and stepped back, her hands going to her face. She dropped to her knees and screamed, clawing out her eyes, slim golden snakes erupting from her sundered orbs, a gout of fluid and blood running down her face, and the figure turned to the crowd and spoke again, in a voice that shattered every piece of glass in the room: "THE LAST KING IS COME!" it said.

Wilde shot it in the face. The figure reeled back, the mask shattered, undifferentiated matter gushing from its robes, and it collapsed liquid to the floor. The crowd screamed, pushed, shoved, frightened, as the masked retinue that had accompanied the figure entered from every door, barring all the exits, murmuring in a strange tongue.

Wilde strode before the throne, still pulling the phantom along. Sosostris walked up beside him. He turned his back on the ragged figure in the throne and screamed "I AM YOUR KING!"

The crowd silenced in a heartbeat and stared. Every face in the room shone at them, invisible but palpable power coursing through the hall, then a sound: the resounding crash of metal arms arcing forward and slamming into crushed and formed wooden pulp. It was the clacking of a typewriter, magnified a thousand-fold to a deafening level. The sound came in slow waves, dripping like molasses onto the heads of the assembled throng, resounding heavy footfalls of a dread god on a platform of souls. Each strike of a letter carried with it the screams of a thousand people, dreaming, dead, or just lost in the ramshackle metropolis.

"This is my queen!" Wilde bellowed, gesturing wildly at Sosostris. "And this is my vassal!" he said, shoving the phantom to its knees. "And all of you and all of this and all that ever was and all that ever will be is MINE!"

Sosostris smiled in triumph as power coursed through her. She was becoming something new.

Wilde spun around and addressed the reigning lord. "Now," he said. "Let us see how you like this new mask." He put his hands to his head and began to undo the clasps.

The kneeling figure on the floor raised its head. It was not the Phantom of Truth; it was still Jaycy, and he smiled a terrible smile behind the askew mask Wilde had tried and failed to affix anew.

"No—" Sosostris started to say.

In a fluid motion he stood up and grabbed the hilt of a sword belonging to an adjacent attendant. Wilde stopped and turned around, confused, as Jaycy wheeled back and brought the sword about in a powerful arc that caught Wilde full in the face. He screamed as the wooden jaw of the mask broke loose and struck the floor, even as the blade split his mouth into a bloody smile that ran from ear to ear. He gasped and gurgled blood, then Jaycy raised the sword again and brought it down on the top of Wilde's head, cleaving it in twain, mask and blood and skull and brain shattering and splitting. Wilde weaved as the rest of the mask

fell apart, and the eyes of the stranger were themselves once again, and as the man dropped to his knees, he looked at Jaycy with gratitude.

Then he was dead.

The hall was hushed.

The figure on the throne did not move.

Sosostris took a step, then another, moving slowly away from the carnage. Her wicked pack of cards fell from her fingers and spilled upon the ground, seventy-seven Emperors looking up at her, a seventy-eighth seated upon the throne.

Jaycy stepped up to the King in Yellow and kneeled, his robes bloody.

"My lord," he said, reverentially.

The figure raised one gloved hand and placed it on Jaycy's head, a gesture perhaps of affection, or of something else beyond our comprehension.

Sosostris's face was full of fear. She looked at the crowd, at the masked retinue that blocked the doors, and then at Alexia, who came forward slowly, trailed by her clockwork sister.

"Alexia?" she said, her voice a whisper of panic.

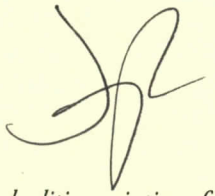
Two servants stood behind the girl, flanking another figure: Doyle, a puppet Doyle, whose strings ran up to the ceiling and were lost in the intricate curves and patterns that camouflaged a maze of tracks. His face was, of course, an emotionless mask.

Alexia looked up at Sosostris. "We told you there would be repercussions."

Sosostris screamed. She dropped to her knees before the child and grabbed at her own face, clutching her puffy, aged skin, screaming, then her hungry insensate fingers found her eyes and like Camilla before her she clawed them out, releasing a torrent of the slim golden snakes and the gelid tissue that accompanied their passing. Alexia stepped forward and grabbed Sosostris's head, kneeling under her, as gouts of snakes and blood poured out and covered the little girl.

"You see, Auntie," she said in her small voice, her entire body drenched with the blood of the dying Madame Anna Sosostris. "*I* am the Queen in Red."

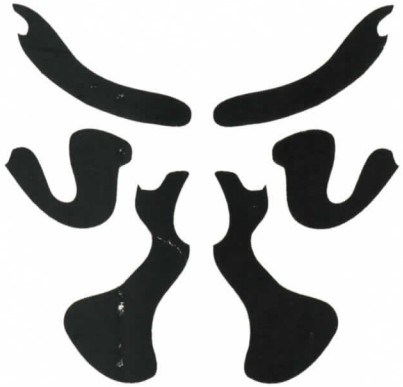
This chapbook is typeset in Adobe Garamond.
The display face used for the title and page numbers is Escalido Gothico.



This is a limited-edition printing of one hundred copies,
which have been signed and numbered by the author.

This copy is number 41 *of 100.*

T.S. Eliot, in his poem The Waste Land, *described Madame Anna Sosostris as "the wisest woman in Europe, with a wicked pack of cards."* Sosostris *tells her story—or at least its endgame. The lady of situations comes to the enigmatic Hotel Broadalbin in New York City, a nexus for travelers in esoteric realms, accompanied by her mysterious nephew. She has come to do battle with a grotesque assortment of plotters and players, each pursuing their own secret agendas. Inspired by the works of author Robert W. Chambers, this tale of intrigue and grue is the third in a series by this same author, following* Broadalbin *and* Ambrose, *also published by Armitage House.*



Author John Tynes is a writer, editor, and graphic designer who has been working in the roleplaying game field since 1990. His fiction credits include "Feast of Kjeld" in The Duelist *magazine, "The Second Effort" in the anthology* Made in Goatswood, *"The Nullity of Choice" in the anthology* Singers of Strange Songs, *"The Dark Above" in the anthology* Delta Green: Alien Intelligence, *"Twilight" in the anthology* Delta Green: Dark Theatres, *and the novel* Delta Green: The Rules of Engagement. *As a game designer, he has authored or co-authored* Delta Green, Unknown Armies, Puppetland, *and other titles.*

ARMITAGE HOUSE

Seattle, Washington

ISBN 1-887797-18-1 $6.50